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AUTHOR Perry, Patricia H.
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ABSTRACT

Through three semesters of teaching the nonfiction essay, an instructor has come to terms with the fact that she has yet to attempt the type of personal essay that she asks her students to write, essays in which personal experiences with death are shared. However, a reminiscence on death through a recounting of her reactions to and understanding of various deaths among her friends and family, most notably that of her father, is such an attempt. The essay takes the form of relating a number of less significant deaths which prepare the ground for her father's drowning. As a writer, she realizes now that her mother's wonderful explanation to her at age 4 of what happens to people when they die and her mother's belief in angels allowed her as an adult to accept her father's death and derive some comfort from the knowledge of his ever-present loving spirit in her life. As a result of her own experiences writing this essay, she can conclude with the certainty of experience that allowing students to tap into the need to satisfy what E. B. White called the "audience of one" (that is, the author him- or herself) is the most beneficial aspect of writing the nonfiction essay. Negative attitudes about writing can be turned around in one semester if students are given the chance to explore personal writing with freedom. (TB)

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ED 388 973

Recapturing Experiences with Death: Remembrance, Reflection, and Revision

Patricia H. Perry

Through three semesters of teaching the nonfiction essay, I have yet to engage seriously in that mode of writing, although I have promised myself and my students that I would do just that each time we delve into discussions of Virginia Woolf's "Death of a Moth" or Lewis Thomas' "On Natural Death" or his "Death in the Open" or E. B. White's "Death of A Pig." My students and I explore Woolf's, Thomas', and White's essays or "attempts" to pronounce intentionally or unintentionally some profundities about death, about life, and about nature--both physical and metaphysical. We examine their ideas and writing styles--word choices, rhythm, tone, and "credentials" or authority for their opinions and views, and we share our own experiences with death and our opinions and views on a subject that none of us can really know--that is to live and know enough to go beyond "attempts" of reflections and generalizations based on our experiences. And I have been amazed at my students' experiences--ordinary, extraordinary, natural and unnatural deaths of relatives and friends, strangers and pets-- and at their abilities to capture those experiences so expressively and poignantly in their essays. In addition, most of the students in these advanced composition classes commit not only to the essays on death, but to all three five-page experientially-based essays that they write and revise for the course. They conscientiously and consistently work hard at getting to what Sondra Perl calls "the felt sense" of what they want to say about those experiences with death in particular and about life and death in general--revising, rethinking and reworking their ideas far beyond my suggestions for revisions, so much so that I must read their

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entire final portfolios because they continue to shape and reshape ideas until the deadline.

Now it is my turn not only to try to understand more about the kind of commitment to writing that results from those essay assignments, but also to try to express my most painful experience with death--my father's death. How do I begin to capture it on paper? I guess I should begin at the very beginning or with my earliest memories of death to establish a context for understanding the one experience I have avoided writing about for so many years, as a life experience, and for so many semesters, as a teaching/learning tool. How can I continue to guide and facilitate my students' writing about such a painful and complex subject when I have avoided writing about it myself? Why have I avoided it? Obviously, the strong emotions evoked by remembering such a tragic past event deter my thinking and writing about it, but using the emotions and Woolf's "directions," I might be able to overcome this hurdle. Woolf states that she sees the past "as an avenue lying behind; a long ribbon of scenes, emotions...[She surmises] that strong emotion must leave its trace; and it is only a question of discovering how we can get ourselves again attached to it, so that we shall be able to live our lives through from the start" (23-24). I agree because the strong emotions that I feel when thinking about the accidental drowning death of my father seventeen years ago take me back to my childhood experiences with death.

My earliest memory of death manifests itself as a place--a Woolfian scene-- and not a person. I remember sitting in a hard, straight, wooden-back chair with my Vaseline-greased legs dangling half way to the floor and ending in white ankle socks cuffed by shining black, patent-leather shoes. Some

adults moved quietly and cautiously in and out of the lime green room--an anteroom or passageway between larger rooms. My younger brother, who must have been about four--a year younger than I--busily climbed all over his tall chair by moving his head, arms, legs, and any other part of his body without letting his butt leave the chair--something that would bring down my mother's wrath during such a somber occasion where everyone tiptoed and spoke softly to one another. The range of my vision seemed constrained; perhaps I felt the occasion warranted a bowed head? At any rate, I only saw my legs, the lower extremities of some adults, and my brother, Pete, squirming in his chair. Suddenly I heard voices raised above the whispers; one of them was the familiar voice of my mother saying sternly, "No, they must stay here." Another voice, one I couldn't recognize responded, "But there's no one to stay with them; everybody's going to the church." My mother then said that her children were not going to the church. "They're too young to go to funerals." Pete and I stayed in that room for a long time and someone stayed in the house with us. I don't remember who, but I do remember that he or she told me, in response to one of my many questions about when my mother would return, that my cousin Myrtle had died and that my mother and father had gone to the funeral and burial.

Myrtle was an adult playmate. Strangely light-complexioned (mostly sun deprivation, I now think), humpbacked, and huskily slow-voiced like Boris Karloff or Vincent Price, Myrtle frightened most children and adults with her disheveled hair and peculiar odor, but since she was a cousin, whose parents had reared my mother, we visited her house often and saw beyond her physical and mental deformities. She was a grown-up who lovingly laughed and played with Pete and me, if she felt well enough, but sometimes she didn't recognize us or respond to our many questions as she lay confined

to her bed, which emanated that pungent sickly and sickening stench that I couldn't stand to smell too long.

When I first wrote the preceding scene, my memory did not include the identity of the deceased, so I named one of the women who lived in the house with the lime green room. Later I shared the scene with my mother who had no memory trace of it, but who assured me that the woman I named had not died at that time. The ensuing inquiry into who had died led to some heart-warming reminiscing, and our recollections over cups of my mother's hot, robust coffee and huge slices of her home-made lemon pound cake brought us to certain agreement that it had been Myrtle who I have identified above. Woolf predicts such remembrances; she writes that "in certain favorable moods, memories--what one has forgotten--come to the top" (23). The strong emotions that the memories of Myrtle evoked, coupled with my mother's company, coffee, and cake, led me down the Woolfian "avenue" to an even earlier memory, and as I later began to recapture that memory in writing, scene after scene unfolded as I meandered back and forth along the avenue of my memories of death. The first scene occurred a short time before I sat silently in that room with my legs dangling from the chair--the time when my mother told me that Myrtle had become an angel like my other brother, Leon. The next scene, which predates the day of Myrtle's funeral, involves learning about Leon and death simultaneously.

The talks with Momma about Leon made death in general mysterious and Leon's death in particular, special. Leon died of SIDS--Sudden Infant Death Syndrome--at the age of four months. He was my mother's third child, born a year after my brother, Pete. For some reason, my mother felt that my

brother and I should know about our other brother. Perhaps it was because, in addition to Leon's death, she had had to deal with the absence of her mother who died when my momma was thirteen months old, and she had found a comforting way of recognizing and accepting untimely deaths of people she loved and missed. Holding us both on her lap, she said that Pete and I had our own guardian angel. In unison, we asked, what's an angel? She then showed us pictures of angels in the family's copy of A Guide to Better Living and pictures of Leon, as she explained that when people die; they go up to heaven where they watch over their loved ones down below. Her explanation, the pictures, and Leon's baby pictures merged in my four-year-old mind to produce a cherubic, halo-adorned, gossamer-winged, brown, baby Leon, who watched over us at all times. I felt so proud, so special to have such heavenly love and protection. Quiet play times between Pete and me involved speculation about and speaking to our own angel, and after Myrtle's death, wondering if the two were together, if Myrtle played with Leon. I didn't think of death as something horrible and dreadful or something to fear; the fear came later.

I remember peeking into a small, tin-roofed house decorated with a huge, white wreath topped by a shiny, black bow. There in the center of a candle lit room rested a shiny coffin on a wooden stand surrounded by wooden chairs holding silent people with saddened, solemn faces--my mother's among them. Consequently, after our peeks, my ten-year-old friends and I quickly ducked in unison into the dusk darkened shrubbery, scared speechless by the look at the coffin which held the dead body of Mrs. McCullough, the grandmother of the friend who had instigated the peeking session. Since Mrs. McCullough had been bedridden ever since the brief time

I had lived in the neighborhood, I had not known her in life, so I didn't fear her in death. I merely reacted to the "waiting up" ritual scene and the fear that my mother might see me peeking into the window of the house.

I remember sitting on the concrete wall below my house which stood on a hill opposite a small, red brick church and observing , with some of my friends, the activities surrounding the arrival of a long, black hearse which had cautiously crawled up to the church. Two men debarked from each side, opened the back to remove some metal structures, then carried them into the church, the depository of many colorful and fragrant floral arrangements and wreaths. Other men and women had carried them into the church for what seemed like hours. The two men returned to the hearse and began removing the coffin. I remember feeling an unknown fear (fear of what?) just looking at this container of death as it rested on the sidewalk in broad daylight. The body within belonged to the brother-in-law of my very best friend--a friend who could not join me on the concrete wall because she was preparing to attend the funeral and who I could not accompany to the funeral because my mother thought that at age eleven, I still was too young to attend funerals.

After the silvery mauve-colored coffin was removed to the church, and the hearse lumbered slowly from the curve, my friends and I decided to take another peek at death by sneaking into the church before the mourners arrived for the pre-funeral "lying in wait" period. That sneak preview of a funeral yielded only a little more than my earlier peek--more in terms of a sanctuary setting and that overpowering sickly sweet smell of floral wreaths (Do they smell that way because of the occasion?) Later there was the debilitating grief of the dead man's wife and young son as they departed the

church after the funeral. I felt sad for them and touched by their loss--one I could not and would not begin to fathom, so I maintained a personal distance from death. I accepted and perhaps welcomed my mother's belief that I was too young to attend funerals, and I continued to avoid them, even those of relatives.

I remember hearing Daddy crying as he and my mother talked in low voices across the kitchen table, with its scratched, yellow enamel top and rusted chrome legs. Momma's voice soothed and consoled him. I had never heard my take-charge, strict disciplinarian (when it came to the house rules), but fun-loving and playful, dad cry, so I knew he was greatly distressed, and I knew why: my great grandmother, Martha, must be dead. She had been ill for several weeks, and because of her age, well over ninety years (We had no exact birth records.).Her death was imminent and expected, but there was also my great-grandfather, Frank, to be concerned about. He, like Martha, was well over ninety. The two of them had been married for seventy-seven years, and we suspected that Grandpa Frank would not live long without his Martha.

. I remember our bi-monthly or more Sunday visits to their modest, rural home with the detached, sunken kitchen--to reduce the heat in the living quarters during hot weather. As my father drove our black Willys into the yard, my great-grandmother immediately appeared from the kitchen and climbed up the shallow steps to greet us. She was a short, only five feet, woman with a round face framed by the ruffles of her cotton cap, which I never saw her without, and with the numerous full and long petticoats of a different era. A white, bibbed apron always topped her dress as she stood with arms outstretched and a big, close-mouthed, prim smile on her face. Her gray eyes twinkled and danced in ways that I saw mirrored in my Dad's

face and in my own at times. My grandfather Frank soon joined her from somewhere in the yard or fields, smiling broadly through his long, gray beard and murky, age-lightened, brown eyes. He stood beside her slightly taller in his weathered felt hat, which hid his bald head but not the unmanageable long gray sideburns that ended in his scraggly gray beard, his frayed white shirt, black vest, top coat, and battered black boots. They made such a lovingly handsome couple--old-fashionably handsome and proper, particularly proper when it came to my Dad's teasingly risqué behavior. He loved to flirt with Grandma Martha, who favored the baby boy of her deceased daughter's children, whom she had reared. Daddy greeted her with hugs and kisses followed by some flirtatious remark about how she looked. To which she responded with her favorite expression, "Oh, Mercy; oh, mercy, Joe," her eyes twinkling and rolling upward in obvious delight, as she smiled primly and lovingly up at him.

My memories of my great-grandparents extend very little beyond the above sepia toned, American Gothic type stance I describe above. I have hardly any memories of actually interacting with them beyond the initial hugs and greetings. There were huge gaps--not only generational, but also rural-city and time spans between visits--that created distance between us. Gradually, I opted out of the bi-monthly visits and kept track of my great-grandparents through my parents' updates after their visits. Consequently, when my Grandma Martha died and my Grandpa Frank followed her in death only a week later, I chose not to attend their funerals. My parents felt that at age sixteen I was old enough to decide for myself, even though my mother still believed I was too young to attend funerals. Since I had been able to avoid attending funerals until then and since I didn't think I could bear seeing my Daddy's reaction during the ritual display of grief and loss, I chose

to remain at home that time. Less than a year later, I made a different choice.

I remember hearing about Dill's death from another closer friend, Barbara, who had spent sometime with Dill at the prom the night which ended with her body being thrown out of Mitch's car and into the city reservoir. Mitch survived the result of their reckless drinking and driving spree as the car crashed through the tall, chain-linked fence surrounding the night darkened water, but Dill, the cute, vivacious, class pixie lost her life. She was not a close friend, but I knew her younger sister quite well and wanted to show respect and sympathy for the family. A dilemma--should I and could I attend her funeral as an outward show of that sympathy? I had never attended one before, and I didn't know what they were all about, what I felt about Dill's death, or how I would handle displays of grief. As I write this, I'm beginning to think that my major concerns about death have been directed towards the surviving loved ones. I remember asking my momma, what do I say to someone who has lost a mother, father, sister, or brother? She tenderly stroked my back and responded, "Say what you feel, what's in your heart, honey." My heart always seemed too full for words to flow out of my mouth, so I would end up feeling a great deal, but saying nothing.

I had seen many other end-of-funeral displays of grief when I lived across the street from the church, but no one close to me had died. I had not experienced real loss from death before, and the particular sudden loss of such a young, healthy, and vibrant person escaped my understanding of life, needless to say, death. Initially, I decided to avoid the funeral. Afterall, I could use my mother's excuse of my youth, and I did, even though I

recognized that Dill was my age--too young to die. At the last minute and after some lengthy discussions with Momma who remained neutral: "Do what you feel comfortable doing, baby;" I decided to attend the funeral. Not only would I accord sympathy to the family, but also I would have the opportunity to see and experience more than the "sitting up" and setting up stages of a funeral.

Since my decision was a last minute one, my friends had gone ahead, so I went to the church alone and had to sit (or was it stand?) in the crowed balcony. It seems like every African American high schooler in town had turned out for the funeral. I attended the only high school in town for blacks, so the preceding view is probably an accurate statement. I remember speeches of remembrance of Dill by classmates, speeches of remonstration against drinking and driving by teachers, tons and tons of tears (mine included), and heartrenching screams of grief from family members. The vaulted sanctuary ceiling supported by the masonry walls of the church did little to disperse and soften the sounds emanating from grief-strickened throats and bodies out of control. I asked myself, were all funerals like this one, or was this how the young dealt with the loss of the young, one of their own?

The funeral eventually advanced to the viewing of the body stage, and I nervously filed, along with the other mourners, past the opened coffin. I remember being apprehensive, not necessarily afraid but apprehensive about the ritual , as I stood in the line which snaked from the balcony to the coffin at the front of the church. What would I see? I now had a chance to look at more than the accouterments of the death ritual; I actually would see a corpse for the first time--the corpse of someone I knew, someone who, only days before laughed loudly and moved her hips provocatively as she showed

us how to accomplish the fast foot movement of "The Chicken." How would I respond to that person/body in death?

At that time, I was fascinated by mysteries, horror stories, and psychological thrillers. Gothic romances and Agatha Christie texts topped my reading lists, and I sat spellbound as Alfred Hitchock Presents and Rod Serling's Twilight Zone prepared me for my next venture into the mysterious acts of minds propelled to murder and mayhem for whatever incomprehensible but intriguing reasons. Long before I advanced to those psychological thrillers, I avidly consumed the B-movie horror flicks popular at that time, a consumption that my mother finally banned because of its adverse effect on me. Usually, I was so disturbed later by what I enjoyed watching earlier (or at least peeking at from behind hands outstretched to cover my eyes) that I could not sleep alone at night. Can you imagine a fourteen-year-old begging to join her mother in bed at night and being allowed? (My Dad chauffeured for American Tobacco Company and, fortunately for me at those times, traveled a lot.)

As I stood in the mourners' line, I knew it was Momma's bed for me that night. Young mourners who proceeded me in the line gasped, groaned, and even collapsed upon gazing at Dill's body. What did they see and feel to make them respond that way? Did the response represent shock, horror, disbelief, what? As I bent to look upon her face, I braced myself and hoped that I could and would maintain my composure, but I too gasped at the unfamiliar face in the coffin. With its dingy, too-dark brown complexion; puffy, heavily rouged cheeks; closed, raised slits for eyes; bright red slit of a mouth; and old-fashionably tightly curled hairdo, the face was not that of the young woman that I had known. I felt no connection to the strange body in the coffin. Neither great fear nor great sorrow engulfed me, for Dill was not there, a

thought which consoled and composed me. Later I told my mother about the funeral, talking easily about the details, questioning the whereabouts of Dill's spirit (in heaven with Leon and Myrtle?), and fearlessly going off to my own bedroom to sleep. Even as they buttressed my fearlessness, the four or five similar experiences with funerals over the next fourteen years kept the question of the whereabouts of "spirits" before me.

Father's Day, 1978. I remember that Daddy tirelessly planned the outing that year and carefully chose the place, Wheeler Lake, a new, synthetic lake and picnic area near Raleigh. He had invited all the immediate family, including his older brother , who owned the only sea-worthy vessel in the family at that time. Dad had worked on his vessel for several off-seasons, but the over-sized, hunter green canoe continued in dry dock. It rested on wooden props in the backyard of my parents' home, where my dad applied sealants and paint, nailed and scraped, and sometimes just sat in it pensively for periods of time; therefore, if we were to engaged in real boating, we needed Uncle Thomas's vessel, which he planned to drive to the lake along with his teenage son, his son's girlfriend, and his toddler-age son. My uncle's wife had died about a year before the outing (I did not attend her funeral; I remained at my uncle's house.); consequently, my dad had become somewhat protective of his older brother. Inviting him on the outing served a twofold purpose: gaining a seaworthy vessel and providing an outing for my uncle's family to take their minds off my aunt's recent death. The trip also was one of our many general purpose family "get-togethers".

Daddy's enthusiasm for the outing was infectious as he encouraged my brother and me to pack our lunches and families and come along. He even pleaded with my mother, a nurse who was scheduled to work, to take the day

off--something she refused to do, until that Sunday morning dawned beautifully bright and promising of good fun and family togetherness; she decided to join the rest of us: my family, consisting of me, my husband, and son; my brother, his wife, and five children; my seventeen-year-old sister; and various members of my brother's wife's family, who always participated--invited or not but always welcomed--in our family bar-be-ques and outings because of the good food and fun. About twenty of us gathered at my parents' house that morning to make sure that we had everything we needed and to make sure we arrived at the lake; only Daddy knew the way.

His outing choice disappointed no one. Although a bit murky near shore, Wheeler Lake stretched and snaked to an emerald transparency at its expansive center, which was directly downsight of our amply shaded and grassy knolled picnic site. Pleased that we were pleased, Daddy in his usual mirthful and gregarious way became a self-appointed activities director for our side of the lake. He cheerfully greeted and playfully teased people as he passed their picnic sites, making sure that not only his family had a good time, but also everybody else's family. With his twinkling gray eyes, expansive gap-toothed grin, and sincere, good-guy manner, Daddy won the hearts and widened the smiles of many as he exhibited his boating swimming, and horseshoe prowess. By late afternoon, when thoughts reluctantly but necessarily turned to leaving the lake, almost everyone on our side of the lake had encountered "Jovial Joe" and his huge family. Perhaps that's why so many people came to our aid when Daddy didn't emerge from a playful leap into the lake.

Teasingly shaking the floating dock on which sat a group of the grandchildren who were dreading leaving the lake, Daddy pretended to lose his balance and with flailing arms and spread eagle legs, he jumped into the

lake, fully clothed and laughingly shouting the usual verbal accompaniment to such antics, "Good-bye, old, cruel world!" From our visual vantage point of the knoll ending at the dock, the rest of us looked down on Daddy's antics and laughed, as we secured food and furniture for loading into the various vans and vehicles. I remember looking up and seeing Daddy's head break the surface of the water then silently submerge once again. The uncomfortable silence continued and the surface of water surrounding the dock remained unbroken, as we all called and shouted to Daddy to end the joke. A bit of panic set in when we got no response, so my brother, my husband, and some other men in our group started shedding clothes and playfully admonishing Daddy for such a cruel joke as they dived into the lake to force him to end it. As, one-by-one, they rose to report their inability to see or locate him, real panic set in and a crowd began to form around the dock, as people spread the news that "Jovial Joe" may be in trouble. Someone alerted the lake police and rescue team, who joined the many divers already frantically searching the lake. As the daylight diminished to dusk, dragging the lake became the necessary next step. I remember turning my attention away from the lake and hopefully searching the faces in the crowd; I just knew that he would end this joke by popping out of the crowd, and I was annoyed that he would cause all this trouble. I tried to calm my mother and myself, as we sat on the knoll away from the lake and the crowd. I just could not let her or me believe that my life-loving dad lay motionless and dead at the bottom of that lake. Rising above the clinking and clunking of the chain, the shout, "Look! They found him!" shattered that belief. Fortunately, when my mother and I instinctively turned to look, my husband had the foresight to recognize the enduring painfulness of such a sight; he quickly moved to block our view, but I immediately felt betrayed--not by my husband but my father. It was no joke!

A blow from the floating dock struck the life right out of him. For the very first time, I faced real death--not the angelic afterlife or the earthly ritual passing, but the loss of one of the persons responsible for my life--a life that he had filled with such special love and joy. It was no secret that from the time I entered the world; he doted on me, and I grew up confident that there was nothing that my dad would not do for me, or I for him. He had always been there for me no matter what. But now Daddy was neither there (Where was he?) to lead the family home from the lake nor would he ever be home again. With this realization came such agonizing pain; I felt the blow of his absence striking every fiber of my presence and resounding through every bone, muscle, and nerve of my body. Needless to say, that excruciating emotional pain produced an eternal fount of feelings and tears, which continues to flow profusely at times, like right now, as it spews its loving and torturous memories and salty stream upon my keyboard, while I write and know that Daddy watches and guides me from wherever he joined Leon, Myrtle, Grandma Martha, Grandpa Frank and my other loved ones.

Writing about the death of my father, while producing few surprises in terms of emotions and feelings (I've had almost seventeen years to deal with those.), produced numerous surprises in terms of my thinking and writing, as well as my thinking about teaching writing. In addition, my sense of involvement and commitment to my experience substantiates my students experiences with their nonfiction essays and reinforces my belief, that while some may view the genre as "non-academic" writing, it promotes the kind of thinking and thinking about writing that *could* make our students better writers of so-called "academic" essays.

I set out to write about that fatal Father's Day outing, but found myself unable to begin at that point because I needed first of all to have my audience understand my responses--my immediate and later responses-- to my father's death. Certainty that they could not understand how an almost fifty-year-old woman could believe in angels--not merely in their existence, lots of people do that, but believe that her dead family members become loving, protective, and even helpful guardian angels--caused me to provide the context from my past. I realize that my mother's wonderful explanation to me at age four of what happens to people when they die allowed the adult me eventually to accept my father's death and derive some comfort from the knowledge of his ever-present loving spirit in my life. How grateful I am for a childhood that fostered an innocence that required relatively easy answers. How does one comfort today's four-year-old, who is likely to see horrible instances of death in her own front yard? Isn't it possible that the many cartoon "deaths" that she witnesses every day on TV have placed her beyond the innocence and comfort of the existence of angels?

Initially, I had no idea that the context for my comfort with my dad's death existed in the numerous memory "scenes" that Woolf's words helped me to recapture, but the trip along the avenue of my past resulted in my need to recapture the source scene and each supporting scene for that belief in angels as realistically as I could--not realistic in the sense of presenting them so my audience could see them vividly, but presenting them as they happened to me, as I saw them happen in my memories and reflections of those memories, so that my audience not only saw and felt what I saw and felt, but also perceived as I perceived at that time. After this initial concern for my broader audience as I attempted to recapture the scene, it then became crucial to understand and capture my perceptions and

understandings. At that point, my audience became an audience of one--me. E.B. White writes that "The whole duty of a writer is to please and satisfy himself, and the true writer always plays to an audience of one." (qtd. in Smart 79). True writer or not, I gave priority to rethinking and revising for the purpose of presenting my perception of my experiences as close to how I experienced them as possible. I played to an audience of one; thus, the generating, re-visioning, reflection, and recapturing work took on a life and momentum of their own as they drove me along the avenue of my past. The obvious proof lies in the length of this essay, which is more than twice as long as it needed to be, as it rambles through my experiences with my advanced composition class, memories of death experiences, reflections on those memories, as well as reflections on writing about them in this piece. The "essay" experience opened a floodgate of memories, thoughts and ideas that even now refuse to cease.

As a result of my own experiences writing this essay, I can conclude with the certainty of experience that allowing our students to tap into the need to satisfy that audience of one is the most beneficial aspect of writing the nonfiction essay. Like my students, I approached this self-assigned task with some trepidation. Except for diary and journal entries, I have written few "formal" pieces of personal nonfiction, but I quickly lost my fear and eagerly engaged in satisfying myself as a good thinker about myself, if not about myself as writer. Never before have I felt freer as a writer. While there may have been constraints on my abilities to express myself successfully, there were no constraints on my thinking. Who can limit my thoughts and reflections on *my* experiences? And like my students, I began to feel positive about my abilities when I read something like my description of my great-grandparents and miss them to the point of unexpected tears. Tapping into

that audience of one--seeing myself as audience--strengthened my sense of the larger audience--the readers I intend to reach. Once I became satisfied with my "scene," I turned my attention to the needs of that larger audience; satisfied what I thought to be their needs as much as I could, then returned to my needs as an audience of one. In other words, my sense of audience became recursive--perhaps another level of thinking involved in Perl's "retrospective structuring," beginning with what is already there *inchoately*, and bring[ing] whatever is there forward by using language in structured form" and "projective structuring," which is "the ability to craft what one intends to say so that it is intelligible to others"(153) in the recursive process of writing. Opportunities to write, to think and to remember, then to reflect upon and to revise experiences, ideas, and audiences this way undoubtedly impact productively on other areas of students' thinking, writing, and learning in college.

Some students who have had few successful writing experiences complete my course with an entirely different view of themselves as writers. I now know with certainty why their negative attitudes towards writing can change to positive ones in one short semester--a semester that predictably comes near the end of their academic careers. Most of my students delay taking the required advanced composition course until their last semester of college. But I am now resolved more than ever that those students who take my section of advanced composition will not end their undergraduate academic careers without exposure to the kind of reading and writing that open up the thinking and writing process so challengingly and rewardingly. Writing this essay confirms for me the far-reaching effect and value of the nonfiction personal essay. Thanks to my students and my angels: Leon,

Myrtle, Grandma Martha, Grandpa Frank, Dill, et al.; and very special thanks to you, Daddy.

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